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Piranesi's Views of Rome

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Piranesi's Views of Rome

June 22 - September 1, 2007

La Salle University Art Museum

Hours: Monday to Thursday, 10 am - 4 pm; Friday 10 am - 3 pm

Piranesi's Roman Views, the *Vedute Romane*

Giovanni Battista Piranesi was one of the most influential graphic artists in eighteenth-century Europe. A specialist in the production of views, or *vedute*, topographical images of ancient and modern architecture, he created some of the most idiosyncratic and striking prints of his day.

Though little is known about his training as a print-maker, he must have been exposed to theater designs, specifically to the scenography of the Bolognese artist Ferdinando Galli Bibiena. Bibiena's most striking innovation was to replace the central focal point of traditional sets with vanishing points located at the far right or left, producing a dramatic kind of view known as the *scena per angolo*. The effect is to give the impression of extraordinary spatial recession by situating the buildings in such a way that the eye is led from the front to the back of the image. This perspective device is used in many of his prints, including numbers 3, 6, 8 and 9 seen here.

Piranesi's *Vedute* document the modern and ancient architecture that is characteristic of Rome. These images were particularly popular when the city was the focal point of the Grand Tour, a trip around Europe that was particularly chic amongst young, upper-class British men. Its primary value lay in exposing gentlemen to the cultural artifacts of antiquity and the Renaissance as well as to aristocratic and fashionable society. Visitors on the Grand Tour snapped up Piranesi's *Vedute* as souvenirs of their overseas trip.

The prints themselves offer an almost exhaustive catalogue of the important sights in late 18th-century Rome. Piranesi composed his images by manipulating the actual topography of the site to enhance and magnify the viewer's experience of the city. In general, Piranesi frames a vista that conforms to what the viewer would see at a particular site, but also adds elements within it that would not have been immediately visible. The images are not just documents of buildings and places, however, but expressions of the life of the city. The prints are usually peopled with beggars, tramps,

dogs and occasionally well-heeled gentlemen in fanciful carriages, and offer a vivacious counterpoint to the prints' static, built architecture. Frequently the people seem to point towards something they have seen, and express the kind of lively curiosity the images were designed to evoke in their viewers. In other cases, the beggars seem to partake of the buildings' general aura of dishevelment and decay, and seem appropriate attributes of Rome's antiquity.

Piranesi's *Vedute* had a profound effect on eighteenth-century society. Eclipsing earlier views through his dramatic compositions, Piranesi shaped expectations of Rome to such an extent that Goethe, who had come to know the place through Piranesi's prints, was disappointed when he finally laid eyes on it, finding the city less imposing and grandiose than the etchings had led him to believe.

1. *The Arch of Titus* [Veduta dell Arco di Tito], 1760
Gift of Dr. Helen North in Honor of the Retirement of Caroline Wistar

The Arch of Titus is a marble triumphal arch with a single arched opening, located just to the south-east of the Roman Forum. Emperor Domitian constructed it shortly after the death of his brother, Titus (AD41-79/81). The arch commemorates the capture and sack of Jerusalem in AD 70, which effectively terminated the Jewish war begun in 66 AD. The Arch of Titus provided a model of many of the triumphal arches erected since the sixteenth century.

2. *Fountain of the Acqua Giulia* [Fontana dell'acqua Giulia], 1753

The Aqua Julia, one of the aqueducts on which the city's water supply depended. Built by Agrippa in 33 BC it brought water from the Alban Hills south east of Rome and was part of a major enlargement and modernization of water services under Augustus. This section of the Acqua Giulia, beside the Via Tiburtina, was being excavated at the time Piranesi made this print.

3. *The Capitol, Seen from the Side of the Central Steps*
[Veduta del Campidoglio di Fianco], 1775 (error for 1757?)

The view shows the Capitol, the administrative center of ancient and modern Rome. The Renaissance architecture of Michelangelo's Palazzo dei Conservatori fills the sheet in the background. In the foreground, stretching across the width of the sheet, are important Roman antiquities. They are arranged symmetrically on each side of the head of the stairs leading up to the Capitoline Hill. The famous classical statues of the two *Dioscuri* with their horses tower over the humans in the foreground.

4. *The Villa D'Este, Tivoli, 1773*

The Villa d'Este was commissioned by Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este (1509-1572), son of Alfonso I d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia and grandson of Pope Alexander VI. He had been appointed Governor of Tivoli by Pope Julius III, with the gift of the villa, which he entirely reconstructed. The cardinal drew inspiration from the nearby Villa Adriana (the palatial retreat of Emperor Hadrian) and, reviving Roman techniques of hydraulic engineering to supply water to a sequence of fountains, he created an elaborate fantasy garden whose mixture of architectural elements and water features had an enormous influence on European landscape design.

5. *The Piazza di Spagna, 1750*

The Piazza di Spagna is at the base of the Spanish steps, leading up to a steep slope to the church of Trinità dei Monti that was under the patronage of the Bourbon kings of France. At the base of the stair is a fountain in the shape of a little boat, the Fontana della Barcaccia, designed by Pietro Bernini and his son Gian Lorenzo Bernini. In 1588, Rome was flooded when the Tiber burst its banks. When the waters subsided, a small flat-bottomed boat used to rescue people and move possessions was left stranded in the mud. The boat

became a symbol of Roman efforts to survive the floods.

6. *Basilica of S. Giovanni in Laterano*, 1749

The Lateran is the first cathedral of Rome, where Emperor Constantine allowed the Pope to set up the Episcopal chair after 312. The original basilica burned down twice in the fourteenth century, and in the seventeenth century, what remained was in danger of collapsing. Pope Innocent X gave the task of restoring the building to the famous architect, Francesco Borromini, in preparation for the Holy Year of 1650. It was during Borromini's restoration that the church was given its Baroque look seen here.

7. *Palazzo Stopani* [Veduta del Palazzo Stopani [sic] architettura di Rafaele d'Urbino], 1776

This building is situated not far from the well-known Piazza Navona and was long believed to have been designed by the Renaissance master Raphael. The artist's role, as the title suggests, accounts for the building's architecture among Piranesi's Roman views. The building came into the hands of the Vidoni family after Piranesi made the etching and is now known as the Palazzo Vidoni, and not the Palazzo Stoppani, as the print's title suggests.

8. *St. Peter's Outside the Walls* [San Paolo fuori le Mura], 1748

After his execution, St. Paul was buried in a cemetery on the site of this church, St. Paul's outside the city walls. Before the church was built, a shrine marked the spot where St. Paul died. The first church was built on the site by Emperor Constantine and was consecrated in 324. Much of the structure seen in this print dates much later, however, to architectural interventions undertaken by popes in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

9. *The Hadrianeum (once used as a custom house) in the Piazza di Pietra* [Veduta della Dogana di Terra a Piazza di Pietra], 1753, Gift of Dr. Helen North

A section of the north-east side of the Hadrianeum on the Piazza di Pietra is all that is left of the ancient Temple of Deified Hadrian. The remains include eleven fluted columns of white marble with Corinthian capitals and a richly decorated entablature. The temple was built in honor of the dead emperor by his adopted son and successor, Antoninus Pius in 145. It is now a part of the modern bourse.

10. *The Basilica and Piazza of St. Peter's* [Veduta della Basilica d S. Pietro in Vaticano], 1746-1748?

This image is the last and one of the most famous of several prints Piranesi made of St. Peter's Basilica. It is a remarkably rendered bird's-eye view of St. Peter's church and the enormous elliptical piazza that stretches out before it. By distorting the scale and perspective of the square and the colonnade that defines it, Piranesi conveys Bernini's intention for the space to enclose the visitor within "the material arms of Mother Church."

11. *St. Peter's Interior: Beneath the Dome* [Veduta interna della Basilica di S. Pietro in Vaticano], 1773

St. Peter's Basilica is a monument to the disciple Peter whom Christ declared the rock upon which he would build the Church. The Vatican has long held that Peter was buried under the Basilica, and Pope Urban VIII commissioned the artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the seventeenth century to design a structure that would be placed over the tomb of St. Peter. Bernini's designs incorporated giant Solomonic columns inspired by columns that ringed the altar of the Old St. Peter's.

Dr. Madeleine Viljoen, Director and Head Curator